

# Jean Gottmann

Jean Gottmann (1915-1994) was an atypical French geographer. Attentive to global changes and the influence of English-speaking geographers, he defended geographical tradition while at the same time modernising it and attempting to remove its theoretical and methodological failings. He thus stands out both from those who remained rooted in a classic, regional approach, and from those who adopted the "revolutionary" trends. His ideas were often out of step with consensus in the discipline.

Gottmann's life covers a large portion of the history of the 20th century. He was born in 1915 in Kharkov to a family of Jewish industrialists. He grew up in Paris, where his adoptive parents settled after the assassination of his parents in 1917. During and after his studies in the Sorbonne, he became the disciple and closest collaborator of Albert Demangeon. His career in France was abruptly halted by the Second World War and the anti-Jewish persecutions. He arrived in the United States in 1941, on the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour, and he embarked on an "intellectual transhumance" (his phrase) that lasted more than thirty years until he was elected to the Chair of Geography in Oxford University. During this long period, he moved constantly among several different cities and between America and Europe, taking on responsibilities in teaching, research, and politics. The list is impressive - among the posts held, he was associate researcher in the Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies from 1942 to 1965, researcher and lecturer in the John Hopkins University from 1943 to 1948, advisor to the Ministry of Economy in 1945, directors of studies in the United Nations from 1946 to 1947, researcher in CNRS from 1948 to 1951, lecturer and researcher in the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris from 1947 to 1960, senior lecturer in the Ecole des hautes Études en sciences sociales from 1960 to 1983, and finally professor in Oxford from 1968 to 1983. Research and study, often funded by renowned foundations such as the Twentieth Century Fund, alternated with teaching and political activities. He travelled widely to attend conferences and lectures.

In the course of his travels, Jean Gottmann formed a network of colleagues, friends and disciples across the world, from Canada to Japan, the United States, the UK, France, Italy, Greece and Israel. Constantin Doxiadis, the Greek urban planner who founded the World Society for Ekistics, was his alter ego until his death in 1975.

## 1. *Megalopolis*

In 1961 Jean Gottmann published a geographical study of the east coast of the United States encompassing Boston, New York, Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia and a whole series of other cities and urban areas. This work, entitled *Megalopolis*, was seen by the Americans as a "regional study", typical of the French geography of which Gottmann was considered to be the product. Although it did not go against this tradition, Gottmann's work nevertheless went well beyond. The term megalopolis conceptualised an emerging urban reality: a vast functional space the components of which did not exhibit spatial continuity. The analysis of this evolution enabled the organisation of geographical space in the developed countries to be anticipated. The prophetic nature of *Megalopolis* explains the enormous impact it had, directly and indirectly. Gottmann had radically transformed the way in which human sciences as a whole viewed the urban entity.

By introducing the theme of the megalopolis, Gottmann did not feel constrained by the urban branch of geography. The megalopolis was an ideal window to review that main geopolitical issues of the day. What was the foundation of American power? The economic, social, cultural and spatial innovations accumulating on the east coast of the United States provided an answer to this. Gottmann interpreted them by suggesting a series of new phrases and epithets: he refers to the appearance and importance of the "quaternary" sector, to the functioning of the megalopolis as a "hothouse" of technological mutations, and to its role as a "hinge" between backwater America and the rest of the world.

## 2. Political geography

In three works (*La politique des Etats et leur géographie*, *Éléments de géographie politique*, and *The Significance of Territory*), and in a series of articles, Gottmann broached the theory of political geography. A particular opportunity to make a stance on the relationship between geography and politics was afforded him by his French mentor, André Siegfried, when he asked him to take on teaching responsibilities in the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris. Convinced of the important role of politics in geography, Gottmann thus sought to intervene in the general debate on geographical theory.

After the Second World War, this question was at the heart of geographers' concerns. Gottmann remained aloof from the various "revolutions" (neo-positivist, Marxist etc) that contested the empiricism of a tradition viewed as "idiographic" and sought inspiration from outside the discipline (in mathematics, econometrics, historicism). To overcome principal epistemological handicap of the geographical discipline (the Man/Nature dichotomy), while retaining its specific features and its curiosity (the diversity of geographical space), Gottmann proposed a re-conceptualisation of geography. The key concept was the partitioning of geographical space. Crucial to the organisation of geographical space, this concept was interpreted as the complex interplay of the forces of Circulation (a concept that already existed) and the forces of Iconography (this was a new concept: the expression of the cultural resources of societies enabling them to guard against the unsettling effects of the excesses of Circulation). This "psychosomatic" reorganisation of the stuff of geography, and also Gottmann's reflections on territoriality, went relatively unnoticed in the Cold War period. They have proved today to be prophetic, and are valuable lines of approach for interpreting the great mutations of the world today. The great debates that arose after the end of the cold war ("the end of History", "the end of Territory", "the conflict of civilisations") can be put in perspective and contextualised by way of Gottmann's concepts.

An unconventional geographer in the post-cold war academic world, Jean Gottmann was somewhat marginalised within the institutions and structures in which he was involved - the French intellectual scene, American universities, or Oxford.

## Bibliographie

Main works by Jean Gottmann:

- L'Amérique, Hachette, Paris, 1949 (rééditions actualisées: 1954, 1960)
- A Geography of Europe, New York, Henry Holt, 1950 (rééditions actualisées: 1951, 1954, 1962, 1969)
- La politique des États et leur géographie, Armand Colin, Paris, 1952
- Éléments de Géographie Politique, 2 fascicules, Paris, Les Cours de Droit, 1955
- Études sur l'État d'Israël et le Moyen Orient, Paris, Armand Colin, 1959
- Megalopolis : The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States, New York, The Twentieth Century Fund, 1961
- Essais sur l'Aménagement de l'Espace habité, Paris, Laye, Mouton et Co., 1966
- Virginia in our century, Charlottesville, The University Press of Virginia, 1969
- The significance of Territory, Charlottesville, The University Press of Virginia, 1973
- Centre and Periphery: Spatial Variation in Politics, Beverly Hills et Londres, Sage Publications, 1980
- Megalopolis Revisited. Twenty-five Years Later, Institute for Urban Studies, monograph n° 6, University of Maryland, Baltimore, 1987

Studies on Jean Gottmann

Two international conferences on the work of Jean Gottmann have been held in Paris:

- Sur les pas de Gottmann. Les Iconographies européennes. Représentations, idéologies, territoires, géopolitique, organised by the Commission de géographie politique du Comité national français de géographie, 7th and 9th October 1996. Publications derived from this conference : "Iconographies", GeoJournal, 2000, 52/4 (ed. Georges Prévostakis, Herman van der Wusten). "In the steps of Jean Gottmann", Ekistics, 2003, 418-419, 420-421, 422-423 (ed. Calogero Muscara, Panayis Psomopoulos)
- L'orbite de la géographie de Jean Gottmann, organised by the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris-Sorbonne university and the Société de Géographie 29th and 30th March 2005. Publication derived from this conference: « Une géographie dans l'histoire », La Géographie, no 1523 hors série, January 2007